

The House will vote on today on a Continuing Resolution (CR) to fund the government through November 18. The Senate passed this CR last week. Because of advanced appropriations, the VA Medical account is funded for the next fiscal year, but we await word from leadership as to when the FY12 Mil/Con VA appropriations bill will be conferenced.

#### Proposed TRICARE fee increases

President Obama's new deficit reduction plan includes some proposed TRICARE fees increases. The proposal calls for a \$200 enrollment fee

for retirees 65 and older utilizing TRICARE for Life benefits. The proposal also calls for an increase in TRICARE drug co-pays.

Beneficiaries having prescriptions filled at a retail pharmacy will pay \$5 for generic drugs and \$12 for a brand-name prescription, and \$25 for brand-name drugs not on the preferred list. For mail-order prescriptions, the cost of a 90-day supply is free for generics, \$9 for brand names and \$25 for brand names not on the preferred drug list.

These are only proposals at this point, no legislation. Any changes to TRICARE would require congressional approval. Furthermore, as designed, these changes would affect only new military personnel, not those currently serving.

#### Proposed changes to military retirement

There have also been proposed changes to military retirement benefits.

One such proposal by the Defense Business Board entitled, "Modernizing the Military Retirement System," would replace the current military pension system with a 401(k) style retirement plan to which the government would make annual contributions. It is important to remember that this proposal, as well as the many others that have been suggested in recent months, is non-binding. Any changes to the current military retirement system would require congressional approval. It is also worthwhile to note that both Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen have stressed that there is no immediate plan to alter the current retirement system.

Both have stated that no recommendation to change the system will be made without careful consideration of the impact of such a change on the men and women of our Armed Forces. This proposal would also impact only new military personnel, not those currently serving.

Sen. Johnson is going to co-sponsor The Hiring Heroes Act (S.951). This is a piece of legislation sponsored by Sen. Murray that would do a number of things to expand efforts to train and employ veterans. Among a few to mention, the bill would require mandatory participation in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The idea is that making this program mandatory will ensure that more people leave the military with the skills (resume writing, interviewing, etc.) to compete in the civilian job market. The bill has been endorsed by all the major veterans service organizations

Senator Johnson held a field hearing on August 30 in Rapid City regarding improving access to care through collaboration between I H S and the VA.

Officials heard testimony from both VA and I H S officials , as well as veterans Don Loudner and Iva Good Voice Flute from the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

This was a very helpful discussion for Senator Johnson and is an issue he will continue to work on with the VA, I H S and the tribes.

Those interested in nomination to one of the U.S. service academies should apply by Oct. 31.

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